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Chapter 3: Learning as an adult

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Introduction

A number of well-known studies have presented a negative view of adults' ability to learn language, and various reasons have been suggested to explain why language learning might be more difficult for adults than for younger learners, including maturational factors (such as the Critical Period Hypothesis or myelination), identity issues (see Chapter 10), and affective variables (such as culture shock and language shock). In more recent years, however, research evidence has been accumulating which indicates that motivated adults can manage to learn a new language to high levels of proficiency, sometimes to the point that they are indistinguishable from native speakers, especially if they are also exposed to an input-rich environment. In order to be able to learn language effectively, however, adults may need to be allowed to utilise their more highly developed cognitive abilities (somewhat out-of-fashion according to a Communicative Approach), and to employ their familiar learning style (whether or not this accords with other classmates' styles). The commonly-employed 'native speaker' criterion for success may also need to be reconsidered, since learners may be able to communicate very effectively in their new language, but prefer to retain something of their old accent as an identity marker. This chapter aims to discuss these various aspects and to suggest implications for the facilitation of successful adult language learning.

Overview

Unfortunately for those who would like to adopt a 'can do' approach to adult language learning, much of the research has been quite negative. Several early

studies (e.g., Harley, 1986; Oyama, 1976; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978) all concluded that, although adults made faster progress initially, younger learners were more successful than adults in the long run. Several well-known case studies painted a similarly pessimistic picture. For instance, Schumann (1976) describes a ten-month study of Alberto, a 33-year-old Costa Rican living in the USA. Although test results indicated that Alberto was not lacking in cognitive ability, he appeared to lack motivation to learn English, did not socialise with English speakers, and made very little progress during the ten months of the study. Schmidt's (1983) subject Wes, a Japanese artist living in Hawaii, also 33 years old, was very sociable and had a strong drive to communicate, and his oral competence developed considerably; but Wes showed little or no interest in formal study, so he remained unable to read or write in English and his grammatical control remained low after a three-year observation period. Another example of an unsuccessful adult, Burling (1981) recounts his own experience of trying to learn Swedish during a year as guest professor at a university in Sweden. Burling was in his mid-50s, and he considered himself to have high motivation and positive attitudes. Nevertheless, he judged his own progress as "distinctly unsatisfactory" (p.280).

Reasons which have been suggested for such negative results vary. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH) has long been used to suggest that, past a certain age (often located around puberty), language learning becomes more difficult, or even impossible (see Chapter 2). Another possible maturational explanation is the process of myelination which, as Long (1990) explains, progressively wraps the nerves of the brain in myelin sheaths as the brain develops; like concrete pathways in a garden, myelin defines learning pathways, making it easier to get from one point to another,

and removing the need to re-learn information or procedures every time they are encountered, but reducing flexibility. Maturational constraints are also suggested by Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2003) as the reason why successful adult language learners “deviate from the unspoken norm” (p.539).

Viewing the question from a somewhat different angle, “the construction and reconstruction of learner identity” (Marx, 2002, p.264) is noted as a potential issue for adults when trying to develop a new language (see Chapter 10). Although identity may not be an issue only for adults, our sense of who we are (and are not) tends to become more established as we mature, and this may result in our being less willing to accept change of any kind, including language, since most adults have already developed their own first language (L1). Indeed, according to Piller (2002), identity is actually more important than age when it comes to learning language. The identity issue was also noted by the Turkish adult university students in a study by Soruç and Griffiths (2015): although there was some initial uptake of native-speaker features of spoken English in this study, by the time of the delayed post-test, most of these features were no longer being used. Several of the students attributed this attrition to conflict with their own identity, which created embarrassment and a sense of artificiality.

Other possible explanations which have been suggested in the literature include socio-affective factors such as culture shock, which leaves the learner feeling confused and excluded, and language shock, which leaves the learner feeling nervous and humiliated. Indeed, according to Schumann (1976), these may be the most important variables accounting for Alberto’s failure to learn English in spite of living in an English-speaking environment, which might have been expected to facilitate

his learning. Burling (1981) attributes his lack of success with learning Swedish mainly to social constraints, such as the need to maintain relationships among highly proficient English-speaking colleagues, which can erode motivation and mean that an adult is “likely to give up and conclude that he has lost the capacity to learn a language” (p.284). And, according to Schmidt (1983), although his subject (Wes) was socially motivated to achieve a high level of oral communicative competence, he lacked the motivation to work hard to achieve equal competence in the more formal areas of the language (reading and writing).

Nevertheless, in spite of these negative views of adult language learners, there has been “growing evidence that some learners who start learning as adults can achieve a native-like competence” (Ellis, 2008, p. 31), leading Muñoz and Singleton (2011. p. 1) to recommend “a loosening of the association” between age and the ability to learn language. Examples of positive studies include a well-known case study by Ioup, Boustagui, El Tigi, and Moselle (1994) which documents a case of a successful adult language learner who achieved native-like performance in a new language (Arabic) within about two years when her new husband was conscripted into the army and she was left in a situation of total immersion with her husband’s relatives. This led Ioup et al. (ibid.) to re-examine the Critical Period Hypothesis, since, as Bialystok and Hakuta (1999) put it “biological restrictions such as brain maturation should not be so easily overturned” (p.177). A number of adult Dutch learners of English in a study by Bongaerts, van Summeren, Planken and Schils (1997) could not be distinguished from native speakers, suggesting that “it is not impossible to achieve an authentic, native like pronunciation of a second language after a specified biological period of time” (p.447). Although they found that overall, target language attainment was negatively correlated with age, Birdsong and Molis (2001)

nevertheless found “modest evidence of native like attainment among late learners” (p.235). When Muñoz and Singleton (2007) asked L2 adult learners of English to re-tell the narrative of a movie, two of the students scored within the native speaker range, as judged by native speakers of English. High levels of native-like proficiency were discovered by Reichle (2010) among some of the adult participants in his study, leading him to conclude that “these results are incompatible with the traditional notion of a critical period for second language acquisition” (p.53). And when Kinsella and Singleton (2014) investigated 20 adult Anglophone near-native users of French, three of the participants (all of whom were married to a French spouse, had either bilingual or French-speaking children, and strong links to the French community) scored within the native speaker range, and the authors concluded that “native-likeness remains attainable until quite late in life” (p.458).

Key learning issues

Given that evidence seems to be mounting that adults can become highly proficient in a language other than their first, it is useful to consider how successful learning is achieved by adults. Two factors which seem to be repeatedly in evidence with the adult language learning issue are motivation (see Chapter 6) and exposure.

Motivation

Of course, motivation is well known to be a major predictor of success not only for adults, but also for learners of any age. However, if we look more closely, it is possible we may be able to identify different kinds of motivation. For younger students, motivation is often (though, of course, not always) extrinsic: they need to pass an examination, they are afraid of parental disapproval, or they feel some such

other external pressure which drives them to be successful, or, at least, to avoid being unsuccessful. For adults, these kinds of pressures are largely behind them. Evidence from the literature suggests that what tends to drive an adult to learn another language is often the desire to integrate with a target person or group (such as a spouse, the spouse's family, or a target community), or the desire to use the language as an instrument to achieve a particular goal (such as a qualification or a job). In other words, in the case of an adult, motivation is more likely to be integrative and/or instrumental, and it is this that will drive an adult to invest time and energy in learning a new language.

We can see integrative motivation at work in the cases of Julie, who needed to integrate with her husband's family (Ioup et al., 1994), and Kinsella and Singleton's (2014) three very successful adult learners of French, who had strong ties to the target-language-speaking community, discussed on p.00. Examples of instrumental motivation might be the participants in a study by Bongaerts (1999), the most successful of whom were highly motivated for professional (instrumental) reasons. Other examples might be Kira and Kang, two of the most successful adult learners in a study reported by Griffiths (2013), who were both driven by the desire to improve themselves professionally and to achieve higher incomes and better lifestyles for themselves and their families. Kira (a 28-year-old Japanese man), and Kang (a 41-year-old Korean) were both very focused on their studies and they both invested a considerable amount of effort and out-of-class time in order to achieve much faster than average progress through the levels of the school – in fact, they progressed much more quickly than many of the much younger students with whom they studied. Compared with these two, Yuki (a 44-year-old Japanese woman) appeared to have minimal motivation to learn (she attended the school only as an immigration

requirement in order to be near her children who were studying at the school), and to invest little or no time or effort in her study. As a result, she made negligible progress over a two-year period, although she was quick to ascribe her lack of progress to her age: “my mind is blank”, she said (Griffiths, 2013, p. 110).

Exposure

As with motivation, exposure is not a factor only with adult language learning; for instance, study-abroad programmes aimed at giving students experience with a target language have become very popular among students of all ages (e.g., Freed, Dewey & Segalowitz, 2004; see also Chapter 11). But exposure does seem to be a factor which is commonly mentioned in connection with successful adult learners. Julie, for instance (Ioup et al., 1994) was totally immersed in her husband’s family environment when he was called away soon after their marriage. Marinova-Todd (2003) found that out of 30 participants, the six most proficient students all lived with native speakers of the target language. Moyer (2009) also concluded that interactive experience in the target language was more important for target language development than instruction. Likewise, in a study involving 11 Spanish students, Muñoz and Singleton (2007) found that the most proficient learners were living with native speakers of English. Furthermore, the three most proficient participants in Kinsella and Singleton’s (2014) study all participated actively in the target language community.

We might perhaps, suggest, then, that although merely living in an input-rich environment does not necessarily guarantee that a learner will be motivated to use the opportunity to learn (e.g., Yuki interviewed in Griffiths, 2008, 2013), there is

evidence to suggest that such an environment maximizes the opportunity for effective language development for those who are prepared to invest the time and the effort. Having said that, however, there are examples of adult learners who have achieved remarkable results with minimal exposure to the target language. One such case is described in Griffiths and Cansiz (2015). Gökhan was in his 40s when he decided he wanted to sit an international exam (IELTS). He describes his motivation as trying to avoid “being embarrassed in front of others” (p. 484). He worked hard, investing “as much time as possible” (p. 484), and he used many strategies which are described in detail in the article. When he sat the IELTS exam he scored a Band 9 (reckoned to be native-speaker level). Yet he had never been out of Turkey (except for a brief holiday in the USA), and had had minimal contact with native speakers of English, whom he had found “not available at every corner or when you happen to find them they are usually too busy to offer a helping hand” (p. 484). In other words, we might suggest that, although there are studies which stress the importance of exposure to the target language (e.g., Kinsella & Singleton, 2014; Marinova Todd, 2003; Moyer, 2009; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007, see above) and although intuitively such exposure must be useful, it would seem that lack of this opportunity does not have to be a handicap for sufficiently motivated learners. This generalization probably applies to all learners irrespective of age, but Gökhan’s case illustrates that it is no less applicable to adults than to younger learners.

Implications for teaching and assessment

However, if we accept that adults can learn language, we must consider that they may not necessarily learn in the same way that younger learners do. They may, for

instance, require more allowance to be made for familiar learning styles and established strategies which they have developed over many years (see Chapter 9). For instance, Hiro, a 64-year-old from Japan (Griffiths, 2013) tended to struggle with the kinds of communicative activities favoured by his teacher and enthusiastically enjoyed by his younger classmates. In order to cope with this situation, he would quietly withdraw to the back of the classroom and busy himself with reading or writing in his notebook. This troubled his teacher, however, who felt it interfered with classroom dynamics and also she was defensive about what she felt was an implied criticism of her teaching methods. After discussion with the Director of Studies, the teacher came to be more willing to allow Hiro to work according to the style with which he was comfortable, and, over the time they were together, they gradually negotiated a mutually satisfactory compromise, which included Hiro being progressively more willing to engage in the kinds of communicative activities that he had avoided in the beginning.

Cognitive differences between older and younger learners have also been hypothesized as an explanation of the results of several studies which have found that adults often make faster initial progress with language learning (e.g., Harley, 1986; Muñoz, 2006; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). Krashen (1985) explains that older learners can achieve faster initial progress in terms of their ability to use more well-developed cognitive abilities to negotiate meaning. Ellis (2008) also acknowledges that “the greater cognitive development of older learners is advantageous where explicit learning is concerned” (p.21). Given that cognition has tended to be downplayed in recent years in favour of communicative approaches, this may require some re-thinking of contemporary teaching methodologies, and adults may need to be allowed more cognitive engagement with the language they want to learn in order

to work out and apply the lexicon and the rules of the target language (e.g., Hiro in Griffiths, 2013).

When it comes to assessing what is “successful” and what is not, the emphasis has traditionally been on the native-speaker norm, which is used as the criterion in many studies, (e.g., Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Bongaerts et al., 1997; Ioup et al., 1994; Muñoz & Singleton, 2007; Kinsella & Singleton, 2014). It is quite possible, however, that non-native speakers may get to be extremely effective communicators in a new language, but still retain an accent: indeed, this may be something they choose to do in order to preserve identity (Muñoz & Singleton, 2011). And when we add to this the difficulty (if not the impossibility) of defining what actually is the “standard” accent, even within speakers of the same language, the use of native-speaker norms as a criterion gets to seem even more questionable. As Yates and Kozar (2015) put it, “optimal proficiency development” (p.1) according to the needs and preferences of the individual learner may actually be more important and useful than emphasizing native-speaker-like attainment. This does not, of course, apply only to adults, but it may be more applicable to adults since they have had longer to establish the way they speak. They may therefore find it correspondingly more difficult to change, and they may be less willing to give up an accent which, as Muñoz and Singleton (2011) note, can be an identifying feature which they may wish to retain.

Conclusion

It is probably undeniable that the majority of successful language learners learn when they are younger (e.g., Birdsong & Molis, 2001; Harley, 1986; Oyama, 1976; Snow & Hoefnagel-Höhle, 1978). Even with the more positive studies, the highly

successful adult students are usually a minority, amounting, for instance, to just two out of 12 in Muñoz and Singleton's (2007) study or three out of 20 in the study by Kinsella and Singleton (2014). However, to go from this observation to conclude that adults cannot learn a language is not reasonable, since, there is evidence to indicate that under the right conditions, and given sufficient motivation, highly successful adult language learning is possible. And if it is possible for some, there is no logical reason why maturation per se should explain the fact that, in general, successful language learning is most likely to occur when the individual is pre-adult. There may be any number of reasons why adults, generally, do not learn language as successfully as younger learners, including motivation, reconstruction of identity, time constraints, affective difficulties, social factors or lack of exposure and opportunity for practice. The fact that, in spite of these constraints, there are numerous examples of adults who do indeed manage to achieve high levels of competence in a new language places the existence of a critical period for language learning in serious doubt. It would rather seem that motivated adults can learn to very high levels of proficiency. Some may even become indistinguishable from native-speakers, in as far as that is a valid comparison (see argument above). And even though such learners may be the exception, the authors of this chapter would like to suggest it is time we adopted a positive 'can do' approach to adult language learning for those who wish to undertake it and who are prepared to invest sufficient time and effort in the endeavour.

Questions for further discussion

1. How can adult learners manage their learning in order to achieve successful language learning outcomes? (For some possible ideas, see Griffiths and Cansiz, 2015)
2. What can teachers do to facilitate successful language learning for their adult learners?
3. If you, as an adult, decided to try to learn a new language, what do you think your main constraints would be? What are some of the things you could do to try to manage these constraints?

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